

Fall Bulbs

What are Fall Bulbs?

Fall planting bulbs are flower bulbs that are planted during autumn to provide colorful flowers in the spring. Some examples are crocus, hyacinths, narcissus, and tulips. These are all bulbs that need a cooling period of winter in order to bloom. They also need this time to establish a healthy root system to survive the winter frost. They need to be planted after the temperature reaches 65 degrees, or lower, but at least 6 to 8 weeks prior to a hard frost. Bulbs do best when planted in the ground, especially the ones that naturalize, but can easily be grown in containers as well with extra maintenance. Planning a bulb garden is not essential; however, with a little research and thought, a showy spring garden can easily be attained.

Know Your Hardiness Zone:

To make sure your bulb garden is successful it is important to know your hardiness zone. If you don't know your hardiness zone you could plant bulbs when it is still too warm causing them to sprout prior to the hard frost, and freeze during winter. In colder regions like zones 1-4 additional mulch to protect against severe freezing temperatures (20 degrees below zero) is recommended, but heavy mulching will need to be removed in spring to ensure the flower blooms and grows to its full potential. Central Wisconsin is located in zone 4b so mulching will be recommended.

Bulb Storage:

Prior to planting bulbs will need to be stored in a cool and dry location. If bulbs are stored in a warmer location with high moisture they will be triggered and start to grow. If your bulb has a sprout, it can still be planted, but the sprout should not be damaged or removed otherwise the plant will not grow.

Bulb Selection:

Bulbs should be firm when selected, not mushy or soft, as that signals a dead or bad bulb. Occasionally mold may form on the outer skin, but can easily be brushed off and causes no harm to the bulb. Many bulbs will naturalize, and if cared for properly, will return and bloom the following spring. Some

bulbs that naturalize include daffodils, crocus, hyacinth, muscari, and alliums. Tulips are not native to American gardens and will not return the following year so you should be pulled and replanted the following fall. If you have problems with deer and rabbits you can plant deer resistant varieties like scilla, snowdrops, daffodils, hyacinth, and alliums to help curb destruction in your garden.

How to Plant Bulbs:

Good soil preparation is the key to planting bulbs. Some gardeners dig up larger spaces to plant a large number of bulbs, and others use garden tools to create holes where bulbs will spend the winter. Larger bulbs are generally planted about 8" deep and smaller bulbs are about 5" deep. A general rule of thumb is that the depth of the bulb should be 3x the diameter of the bulb. Bulbs do not like wet feet so they should be planted in well-draining areas that do not collect heavy water. Bulbs can also be planted in layers in pots based on their size. Bulbs should always be placed with the pointed side up, and the flat side, generally containing tiny roots, down, covered with soil, and watered. After planting and the initial watering, you can allow winter rain and snow to take care of the bulbs until spring. For bigger shows of color bulbs can be planted in clumps or staggered.

After Care:

The simplest advice for dealing with spent bulbs is not to do anything. After the flower has bloomed and faded, let the plant die back naturally and brown out over late spring and early summer. This will allow the flower bulb to gain back all of its energy that it spent flowering so it can continue its life cycle. Once they are brown, remove the spent leaves. Some bulbs may eventually need to be dug up and divided to ensure they continue to flower. Fertilizer is not needed in the first year, but the bulbs will benefit from fertilizing using a mild fertilizer for bulbs down the road since most general fertilizers are too harsh for bulbs. If you don't like to see the dying foliage from bulbs, they can be planted among perennials that will hide them as they emerge.